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Introducing the GJSS

Why a graduate journal about interdisciplinary methodology?

The philosopher Ian Hacking (2004) recently raised a polemical point against the usefulness of labelling research as 'interdisciplinary'. Most issue-based research, he rightly observed, involves collaboration among and comparison with a variety of disciplines. This exchange of expertises is necessary in order to achieve knowledge about a specific topic, given that very seldom a complex social phenomenon is recognised and studied by just one discipline. Hacking goes on to argue that such exchange of knowledge is not as such interdisciplinary, but rather that it springs from the capacity of single disciplines to provide specialised knowledge about different aspects of reality. Some open-minded scholars such as himself and few others are then needed to bring together such different threads. Those same scholars would not be able to create such 'postdisciplinary work' if a great number of 'disciplined ants' did not first accumulate the right amount of specialised knowledge.

Hacking's view resembles many other arguments pointing to the obvious value of interdisciplinary projects and endeavours and thus stipulating an unproblematic link between the importance of such work and its popularity within contemporary social science. Why should interdisciplinarity deserve the special attention of publications such as the GJSS, when everyone agrees on its theoretical as well as practical importance? The

answer is that the recognition of the importance of interdisciplinarity does not, as yet, correspond to its practical support within social science institutions. The difficulty of engaging in constructive exchanges among disciplines is a widespread academic reality. To start with, the disunity of social science is an institutional fact. What Max Steuer (2003) calls the 'five pillars' of Anglo-American social science have exploded into all too many specialised bodies of knowledge, each of which is concerned with a specific field (e.g. media studies, international relations), theme (e.g. gender studies, development studies) or area (e.g. Russian studies, African studies). This is all well and good, given the recent turn towards a more situated, contextualised knowledge focusing on common issues rather than common theories. What is interesting and confusing is, however, the fact that such high fragmentation seems to discourage interdisciplinary discourse rather than enabling it.

One reason for this is surely *practical*. The growth of relevant literature, the increasing sophistication of the approaches and the speed of information exchanges enabled by new communication technologies are making it difficult for researchers to find the time and energy to keep updated on work in other areas and to communicate to colleagues in other fields - even when those areas and fields are actually very relevant to their own research. Given this context, an essential skill to be acquired by young academics is the capacity to select types of literature that are relevant to one's own research. Unfortunately, this evident truth is not recognised by most academic institutions, which instead feed on the illusion that stronger disciplinary boundaries will suffice to indicate to each scholar what his theoretical foundations should be. A second reason for the current lack of interdisciplinary discussions is thus *institutional*. While the

need for common foundations remains indisputable, it should be complemented by a capacity to select information on the basis of its relevance rather than purely on the basis of disciplinary demarcation - and this is precisely what academic institutions do not support. Yet, discussions, controversies, debates and disagreements conducted around issues of demarcation (or lack thereof) between sciences, difference or similarities in methodological approaches, birth of 'new disciplines' or death of old ones, and so forth, does not cease to fill academic departments. Discourse over interdisciplinarity is thus an essential, if largely unrecognised, part of academic life, insofar as it encourages the necessary flexibility of boundaries and connections among disciplines.

The GJSS is born out of the conviction that different tools for the acquisition of knowledge should be confronted, compared and brought together in order to analyse the most complex aspects of our social reality. As soon as expertise is required on issues such as development, ethnicity, globalisation and social policy - to mention just a few - the need for ways to piece together insights from different sciences becomes compelling. The GJSS thus aims at providing an intellectual space for exchanging expertise on different types of methodologies, their applicability and eventual transferability across areas of study. The value of maintaining distinctions between different areas of expertise is undisputed, as well as the need for social scientists to acquire some degree of specialised knowledge. It is also true that some gifted and lucky scholars, such as Hacking, do enjoy a relative freedom in their exploration of different areas and connections among existing types of knowledge. The question posed by this journal is, however, the following: should such exchange exist only at the level of accomplished scholarship? Should doctoral and post-doctoral training in social science necessarily focus on a specific

discipline and approach, rather than on a specific topic (thus possibly requiring consultation with another discipline) or a comparison among methodologies?

Our answer is obviously in the negative. The heavy institutionalisation of social scientific disciplines and the proliferation of specialisations encourages research that relies on an increasingly smaller pool of highly specialised material. The degree of fragmentation of social science into disciplines and subdisciplines makes it ever more difficult, both intellectually and practically, to make use of different types of resources so as to take advantage of specialised knowledge as Hacking would suggest. In most cases, academic institutions - including leading journals in all fields - actively discourage creative and critical exchange among young scholars with different backgrounds. Postgraduate students in particular are trained not to extend or challenge their thought processes in this way, for fear that their preparation in their field of choice might suffer from it. The PhD and postdoctoral years should indeed be instrumental in carving a professional niche into the increasingly sophisticated academic space. Precisely for this reason, young researchers should be trained to extend the knowledge they acquire within their chosen discipline to other approaches to reality, so as to develop and confront different types of analytic skills and make an informed, self-critical choice of methodology. This requires not only the possibility to exchange knowledge, but also a meta-level of discussion over the importance of methodological choices and their relevance in shaping disciplinary boundaries.

This meta-level of discussion is what the GJSS attempts to provide. What exactly are the value and implications of interdisciplinarity in the context of different types of research is a question that we intend to pose and discuss, rather than answer. This attitude

is reflected in this first issue. Each of the paper here included draws inspiration from a different set of disciplines and methodologies, which are commented upon more or less overtly depending on the degree of abstraction of the discussion.

Remarkably, this issue as a whole can be defined as interdisciplinary, while this characterisation is less clear-cut in the case of some of the individual papers. For instance, the discussion over cover research methodology provided by Helen Wells and Anneliese Dodds might seem restricted to the field of criminology, thus apparently betraying the interdisciplinary spirit of the GJSS. This seeming lack of consistency is resolved once the contents of that discussion are examined. Wells and Dodds debate methodologies that are taken from and developed by both anthropology and sociology, such as ethnographic research and the relevance of participant observation, among others. They locate such discussion within their specific field so as to clarify the empirical import of their methodological discussion. This also amounts to 'opening up' the black box of criminology to all social scientists who might be facing similar problems in different contexts and thus might profit from exploring the dilemmas and solutions proposed within a different field.

The papers by Wells, Dodds and Alberto Asquer thus contribute to interdisciplinary work by enhancing the cross-disciplinary *accessibility* of their research and thus their *intelligibility* to other social scientists.

A second type of contribution is constituted by actual *case studies* employing interdisciplinary analysis and thus experimenting on its *applicability*. Fiona Moore's combination of business studies and anthropological approaches results in an innovative analysis of the expression and impact of symbols in corporations. An equally interesting

mix of expertises is proposed by Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, whose study of gendered patterns of authorship in archaeology proves how interdisciplinary thinking can lead to the identification of wholly new topics for research as well as methodological insights (a trait characterising also Paul Nagel's research proposal on bias in geographical education).

A third and final type of contribution is to be found in the discussions by Daniel Bloyce and Simon Blackburn, who offer a theoretical reflection over the very meaning of disciplinarity within social science. Their views represent starting points for discussions over the *meaning* and *significance* of interdisciplinarity as such, an explicitly meta-level of reflection that is complementary to the more applied approaches proposed by the other types of contributions.

Taken together, the three dimension of accessibility, applicability and theoretical significance provide the fundamental grounds for GJSS discussions of interdisciplinary methodology. I hope that this ensemble of approaches will prove fruitful and interesting to all our readers and collaborators.

The final words of this editorial are dedicated to acknowledgements. The GJSS is the product of a wonderful experience of team-work, bringing together physically and/or virtually (through the internet) over a hundred dedicated scholars at all levels of academia, from the master student submitting a paper to the full professor reviewing it. Both Esther Foreman and myself, in the quality of managing editors with a bird's eye view on the project, have the opportunity to appreciate everyone's work and never cease to be amazed at how committed and helpful everyone has been. Needless to say, we also experienced how difficult it can be to keep together a truly interdisciplinary and

multicultural team, thus proving in yet another way the worth of this attempt. Our most heartfelt acknowledgement go to the administrative boards (in the Netherlands and in London) of which we are members. Our joint work effectively brought this journal into existence. The student editors and the academic board are also warmly thanked for their essential contributions and competent advice. Last but not least, we acknowledge the institutions that have provided (and hopefully will continue to provide!) the needed financial or structural support: the Academy of World Studies, the C-Sap, the London School of Economics and the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, among others.

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